

Reversals of Fire.

The philosophy of Heraclitus as thematic subtext of

Julio Cortázar's 'All Fires the Fire'

In an interview he gave a few months before his demise, Julio Cortázar identified two teachers from the Escuela Normal 'Mariano Acosta' in Buenos Aires as defining influences on his intellectual career. Don Arturo Marasso, his professor of Greek and Spanish literature, was soon aware of Cortázar's literary vocation. He initiated the young Cortázar in ancient mythology, invited him to his home and gave the talented but poor student free access to his personal library. Marasso introduced him to Sophocles, taught him how to read Homer well, and made him appreciate the lyric poetry of Pindar. Under Marasso's influence he also read all the Platonic dialogues. His philosophy teacher, Vicente Fatone, a specialist of logic and epistemology, broadened his knowledge of ancient philosophy and made him read Aristotle. Cortázar recalls that the challenging Fatone inspired him to consider a career in philosophy. Although he did not have the temperament for systematic philosophy, he recalls: 'Me fascinaba porque la filosofía te mete en lo fantástico, en lo metafísico, pero no tenía un temperamento para avanzar o sistematizar en el campo filosófico y la abandoné.' (Soriano 1983: 4)

Heraclitus in the works of Cortázar

Throughout his life and writings, Cortázar remained fascinated by classical culture.¹ He seems to have been particularly interested in a philosophical author whose fragments have been compared to the choral works of Pindar and who has been called 'one of the most powerful

¹ Two forthcoming articles by Aagje Monballieu study the importance of the classical tradition for Cortázar: 'La vocación helenística de Julio Cortázar. Sus lecturas y su formación clásica en el Mariano Acosta (1929-1936)' *Bulletin Hispanique* 2012 and 'Más que un *amateur* esclarecido. La afición de Julio Cortázar por la filosofía de Heráclito': on the presence of Heraclitus in his personal library, forthcoming in *Neophilologus* 2011.

stylists not only of Greek Antiquity but of World Literature' (Kahn 1983: IX): Heraclitus of Ephesus (° ca. 540 B.C.). Cortázar owned several scholarly books on the philosophy of Heraclitus and it is even fair to say that he collected editions and translations of the Heraclitean fragments. His collection included editions of the original Greek next to Spanish, French and English translations by Battistini, Brun, Farré and others. His love for Heraclitus was also known to his friends: we know e.g. that his copy of *Heraclitus* by Philip Wheelwright (1959) was a gift from his friend the critic Ana María Hernández.²

Heraclitus appears quite often in his writings: both in early and in very late publications. In a short essay published a few years before his death, 'Un sueño realizado' (1980),³ Cortázar mentions *Le rayon vert* by Jules Verne (1882) and he compares this natural phenomenon to the transformation of the elements as described by Heraclitus.⁴ 'Sobremesa' (*Final del juego*), published in 1964, has fragment DK 52 as its motto: 'El tiempo, un niño que juega y mueve los peones' (OC I: 454) / 'Time is a child moving counters in a game.' (W 24)⁵ Heraclitus is quoted in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (*Around the day in 80 worlds*), published in 1967.⁶ And 'the obscure philosopher' is prominently present in his most famous novel *Rayuela* (1963) / *Hopscotch* (1966), especially in chapter 36,⁷ where ancient biographical traditions on Heraclitus are discussed at some length and Oliveira speculates about 'the earth-shaking diamond of *panta rhei*' (Cortázar 1986: 212) while the clocharde Emmanuèle is

² See also what Hernández said about his library (probably in Saignon): 'Pocos libros, recientes, y algunos tomos de Heráclito, cuyas ediciones colecciona.' (Hernández 1997: 730)

³ The essay (*El mercurio*, Santiago de Chile, 11/05/1980) is now available in Cortázar 2009: 198-201.

⁴ 'Y entonces surgió el rayo verde; no era un rayo sino un fulgor, una chispa instantánea en un punto como de fusión alquímica, de solución heracliteana de elementos. Era una chispa intensamente verde, era un rayo verde aunque no fuera un rayo, era el rayo verde, era Julio Verne murmurándome al oído: "¿Lo has visto al fin, gran tonto?"' (Cortázar 2009: 200-1)

⁵ We will refer to the Diels-Kranz numbers of the Heraclitean fragments as DK x. English translations will be quoted from Wheelwright who used a different numbering system, referred to as W x.

⁶ The quote is DK 85: 'It is hard to fight against impulsive desire; whatever it wants it will buy at the cost of soul.' (W 51) In 'Para llegar a Lezama Lima' Cortázar quotes page 408 of José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*, who at his turn quotes Heraclitus: "'Difícil luchar contra el deseo; lo que quiere lo compra con el alma", la vieja frase de Heráclito abarca la totalidad de la conducta del hombre.' (Cortázar 2007: 64)

⁷ See the analysis by Daza Bravo (1994).

pleasuring him orally. This paper would like to discuss the way Cortázar was inspired by Heraclitus in writing a short story that appeared a few years later, in 1966, in the eponymous collection: 'Todos los fuegos el fuego'. We will not present a full discussion of the Heraclitean system, but will only refer to those aspects of his philosophy that will be instrumental to our analysis of the way Cortázar used Heraclitus.⁸ We believe neither Cortázar scholars or classicists have quite appreciated the importance of Heraclitus to this story.⁹ Naturally, in our analysis the focus will be on the interpretations we know Cortázar was familiar with through his own readings, and not on the most accurate interpretation of Heraclitus according to the most recent scholarship.

Fire and the Flow: the permanent transformation of the elements

The philosophy of Heraclitus is often discussed against the background of the Milesian natural philosophers Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. Although this approach distorts the unique quality of Heraclitus's philosophy, as early as Aristotle, Heraclitus has been presented as a philosopher of the *archè*: taking one of the natural elements as the principle of the universe. In the *Metaphysics* (I, 3, 3-9; 983b7-984a17) Aristotle compared Heraclitus to Thales, and presented his doctrine of Fire as the choice of yet another *archè*. Thales had proposed water or moisture. Anaximenes had held that air was the *archè*, 'and Heraclitus of Ephesus holds this of fire.' (984a7) We need not concern ourselves with the distortions caused by Aristotle and later commentators: the books used by Cortázar did not focus on the critical historiography of philosophical terminology and used the concept of *archè* or the doctrine of the four elements in an almost straightforward way. But Cortázar

⁸ See the letter to his publisher Francisco Porrúa, dated 30 March 1965, commenting on 'La señorita Cora' from *Todos los fuegos el fuego*: '[...] pero dicen Aurora y [Eduardo] Jonquières, sus dos únicos lectores hasta ahora, que en el cuento todo fluye heracliteanamente, lo que sería prueba de que la técnica anduvo bien.' (Cortázar 2000: 840)

⁹ A status quaestionis of the available secondary literature on this story is offered by Menczel (2002): Heraclitus is not mentioned at all. More recently there is Houvenaghel and Monballieu (2006) but this is very introductory.

had read enough to know that the fire-doctrine proposed by Heraclitus did not simply present one of the elements as physically underlying all others. The solution he proposed was profoundly metaphorical and it introduced different levels of existence and meaning. This fascinated Cortázar and we will try to present the thought of Heraclitus in view of how the Argentine writer used it to put us ‘in the fantastic, in the metaphysical.’¹⁰

On the first level, fire was for Heraclitus one of the four elements. But the function of fire in his worldview is twofold and can be compared to the function of gold in ancient economy. Heraclitus was contemporary to the gradual development of a money economy in the Greek world. He explicitly made a comparison between his doctrine of fire and the economic function of gold in fragment DK 90: ‘There is exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things, as there is of wares for gold and of gold for wares’. (W 28) Gold is both a substance among substances (gold next to water, or wine, grain, perfume, ...) and a universally recognized means for exchange in the developing money economy. Gold can turn ‘water’ into ‘earth’ and vice versa: you can sell wine and buy a piece of land, or you can sell your land and spend the money on wine.

The economic equation is itself compared to exchanges between the four elements in the cosmos. Heraclitus used the money economy as a metaphor for the interaction between the elements, and he chose fire as the mediator, as the universal means for exchange. In economic exchanges the price or rate is set and agreed upon by humans: *logos* in the double meaning of thought and speech are always involved. But who or what regulates the cosmic exchanges mediated through fire? In one fragment, DK 64: ‘The thunderbolt pilots all things.’ (W 35), it seems as if Heraclitus refers to the supreme god, the god of the lightning, as the deity

¹⁰ Alcalá Galán (1997: 221) refers very briefly to both Nietzsche and Heraclitus.

regulating the universe, but his worldview was not theistic: the gods are mere names for aspects of a universe that is better understood in an equally poetic but far more abstract discourse than any religion can offer. The second half of this fragment (DK 64a) tells us that the cosmic fire is itself a reasonable force, regulating the exchanges it is also mediating in a thoughtful way: the fire is *phronimon*, *Vernunftbegabt*. The world is a self-regulating and reasonable system, as explained in DK 30: ‘This universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be – an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures.’ (W 29) The world *is* fire, although the fire is ever-changing according to regular measures. The link between fire and *logos* is very clear in the second half of fragment DK 31: ‘The transformations of fire are: first sea; and of sea, half becomes earth, and half the lightning-flash.’ (W 32) Wheelwright did not include this in his translation, but Cortázar knew the second half in the translations of both Battistini and Jean Brun:¹¹

Comment le monde est à nouveau ramené en arrière et dévoré par le feu, il l’explique clairement ainsi: “la [terre] se dissipe en mer et sa masse est conservée selon la même mesure (*logos*) que celle qu’elle possédait avant qu’elle ne devint terre.” (Brun 1965: 142-3)

Logos and Fire

The Greek word *logos* has a very complex range of meanings. In his chapter on Heraclitus W.K.C. Guthrie begins with what he calls ‘a brief outline of the ways in which the word was currently used in and around the time of Heraclitus’ (1962: 420): it takes him almost five pages, and then another five to try to establish what the word could mean in the different

¹¹ Brun, nr. 52; Battistini, nr. 29.

fragments of Heraclitus. (1962: 419-30)¹² It is important for the argument of this paper to establish that Cortázar was familiar with the complexity of the *logos*-concept and with some of the discussions on its meaning in the fragments of Heraclitus. *Logos* can mean anything said: from a single word, over an oration and a story, to the faculty of speech itself. It can and actually does simultaneously refer to anything thought: a single thought, an argument and the faculty of reason. Speech and thought are always closely connected in ancient Greece. But *logos* can also mean cause, motivation or truth and can point to measure, relation and proportion, as we have seen in the previous fragment. From Brun and other sources Cortázar knew the discussions on the way Heraclitus used the concept in the extant fragments. He read comparisons between *logos* in Heraclitus and its meaning in the opening of the *Gospel of John*: the divine *Logos*, the Word, la Palabra (Brun 1965: 27-31). And through such sources he was familiar with the debates between modern scholars and philosophers such as Heidegger, whose Seminar on Heraclitus he later on went to buy in French translation.

From these discussions – and of course from the fragments themselves – Cortázar learned that Heraclitus played with the use of *logos* as what he, Heraclitus as a philosopher and a writer, was thinking and saying and of *logos* as the reasonable principle of the universe; a principle, by the way, which could also be understood by listening to the language of the universe as is clear from DK 50: ‘Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to acknowledge that all things are one.’ (W 118) But in some fragments it is almost impossible to decide whether *logos* refers to what Heraclitus is saying-thinking or to the reasonable principle expressing itself in and through the universe. This ambiguity has been the subject of endless scholarly discussions and has been seen as typical for the style of the Obscure One since at least

¹² Compare the Latin term *ratio* or the Dutch *rede* also referring to both reason and speech.

Aristotle,¹³ but it suffices here to say that Heraclitus did not distinguish between them clearly, as most modern translations (have to) do simply through their choice of capital letters (DK 1):

Although the Logos is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it – not only before hearing it, but even after they have heard it for the first time. That is to say, although all things come to pass in accordance with this Logos, men seem to be quite without experience of it... (W 1)

The structuring, reasonable element of the universe is also a language through which the universe expresses itself. But, as is clear from fragment DK 52, ‘Time is a child moving counters in a game’ (W 24), the combination of reason and randomness in the universe conjure up the metaphor of the game, where rules and randomness are combined. The importance of the game in and for the writing of Cortázar has been well studied,¹⁴ but we should realize that he found this presumably post-modern link between reality, time, reason, language and the game already in this Presocratic philosopher. According to Heraclitus, human reason can understand this principle and this language and a writer-philosopher such as himself can express it in his writings. Cortázar was fascinated by the link between words and worlds, by the way things relate to words and how one can create different worlds through different words.¹⁵ The themes of parallel universes, alternate realities are well known in his work. It will be our argument here that Cortázar as a writer took the *logos*-parallels a bit further and constructed stories based upon the Heraclitean *logos*, as a demiurge creating and expressing a universe based upon Heraclitean ‘fantastic’ principles. Before we commence our analysis of ‘Todos los fuegos el fuego’, we need to add one last element to our presentation of Heraclitus, and that is the link between the *logos*-fire and the ever changing world, more

¹³ Aristoteles, *Rhetorica* III, 5; 1407b11 = DK A 4.

¹⁴ See e.g. AA.VV. (1986) and Alazraki’s ‘Homo sapiens versus homo ludens en tres cuentos de Julio Cortázar’ (1994: 91-107).

¹⁵ See Prego (1985).

specifically, the flow of time and the unity of opposites from both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective.

Eternal recurrence and the unity of opposites

Plato's summary of Heraclitus's teachings as *panta rhei* (*Cratylus* 402a) and the famous river-fragments (DK 12 and 91) have passed into popular culture, but most scholars would agree that the philosopher from Ephesus actually emphasized unity and order perhaps more than constant change. From fragments such as DK 6, 'The sun is new each day' (W 36), or DK 60, 'The way up and the way down are one and the same' (W 108), and other fragments we have quoted already, one could construct a very simplistic doctrine of eternal recurrence. But Heraclitus did not simply teach an identical repetition of events over time. Later, Stoic elaborations of his philosophy of eternal recurrence have produced the false impression that he defended the eternal recurrence of the same. Heraclitus underlined the synchronic and diachronic unity of opposites as in DK 88: 'It is one and the same thing to be living or dead, awake or asleep, young or old. The former aspect in each case becomes the latter, and the latter again the former, by sudden unexpected reversal.' (W 113) And he talked about the cyclical nature of the universe, the cyclical process of transformation of the elements in nature, as in DK 36: 'It is death to souls to become water, and it is death to water to become earth. Conversely, water comes into existence out of earth, and souls out of water.' (W 49) In this eternal process of transformation opposites turn into each other. On a higher level the opposites have always constituted a unity. And, although it is uncertain whether this is a historical teaching of Heraclitus or a later Stoic interpretation, through his readings Cortázar was also familiar with the theory of the *ekpyrosis*: the cyclical destruction of the whole universe by fire or, put differently, the reversal of everything to fire. The Stoics, claiming to be inspired by the sage from Ephesus, also taught that the *ekpyrosis* was balanced by a

cyclical deluge. Non-Stoic writers, like Censorinus, also attributed to Heraclitus a doctrine of the Great Year:

There is a Great Year, whose winter is a great flood and whose summer is a World conflagration. In these alternating periods the World is now going up in flames, now turning to water. [...] Heraclitus and Linus thought this cycle consists of 10.800 years. (Kahn 1983: 49)¹⁶

Style and thought are one in Heraclitus. His emphasis on unity through change and on the paradoxical unity of opposites explains his obscure mode of expression. His use of paradoxes was designed to draw attention to this meta-level. Strife and conflict – ‘war’ – are indispensable for this dynamic unity of opposites, as in DK 53, ‘War is both father and king of all’ (W 25), and DK 80, ‘It should be understood that war is the common condition, that strife is justice, and that all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife.’ (W 26) We should add DK 8: ‘Opposition brings concord. Out of concord comes the fairest harmony.’ (W 98) The *logos* of normal people fails to see the harmony (as we have seen, paradoxically one of the meanings of *logos*) of opposites. We refer to DK 51: ‘People do not understand how that which is at variance with itself agrees with itself. There is a harmony in the bending back, as is the case of the bow or the lyre.’ (W 117) The tension between two opposing elements creating a unity as do the composing elements of an arch, a lyre, a bow are metaphors for the unifying tensions in the universe seen by most people as *only* strife and chaos. Heraclitus recognized this paradoxical unity of opposites not only in the cosmic processes regulated by the *logos* and mediated through fire, but also in human language (*logos*). To most people this would come as a surprise, but to Heraclitus it was profoundly meaningful that this was especially the case in words connected to life, death and the unity of

¹⁶ Nr. XLIIIA quoted. DK A 13; Brun 1965: 109.

opposites as in DK 48: ‘The name of the bow (*biós*) is life (*bíos*) but its work is death.’ (W 115) The magical, mystical power of words has always fascinated Cortázar, as it did Heraclitus. We conclude our presentation with the summary by Jean Brun: ‘Il existe un rapport très étroit entre le *logos*, l’harmonie, le combat (*polemos*), la discorde (*eris*), Dieu (*theos*), l’Un (*hen*), le feu (*pur*) et la sagesse (*sophon*): ce sont, sinon des synonymes exacts, du moins des notions qui portent en elle une même intuition centrale.’ (1965: 48)

The unity of ancient and modern times

The title ‘Todos los fuegos el fuego’ is not a direct quote, but it is clearly inspired by Heraclitus DK 90: ‘There is exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things.’ (W 28) Cortázar intertwines two stories and two epochs. One is set in Roman Antiquity, the other in a modern city. Both stories present the tragic outcome of a love triangle and both end in a fatal conflagration.¹⁷ But, in accordance with the teachings of Heraclitus on the unity of opposites, the structural parallels are created by variations of the composing elements.

In the ancient Roman story we read about a nameless proconsul in a nameless province who takes revenge on his estranged wife Irene and on Marcus, a gladiator she feels attracted to. Nothing more had happened between the gladiator and the proconsul’s wife than a few glances and a smile exchanged during a previous fight, but the proconsul had guessed from the first moment. That’s why he has staged the death of this gladiator by arranging a duel with an invincible Nubian giant. The proconsul and his wife both keep smiling politely. They alone are aware of the ongoing struggle. The woman accepts wine from her husband and dreams of poisoning him one day. He forces her to witness the death of her favourite. Actually both gladiators are killed and, immediately after the fight, the sun veil and the oil in the

¹⁷ See Escudero-Alie (2002: 4-5) for the general connection between fire and love and Menczel (2002) for existing, non-Heraclitean interpretations.

underground deposits of the arena catch fire. The huge fire kills the proconsul, his wife and most of the spectators.

The modern story is set in an unnamed, probably French city.¹⁸ This time, the lethal love triangle is formed by a man and two women. Roland Renoir had been in a relationship with a woman called Jeanne for two years but now he favours Sonja. The new mistress goes over to Jeanne's apartment and surprises her with this reversal of roles. The modern story begins after this visit, when Jeanne phones Roland. During this call a very cool Roland neither denies nor explains his change of heart, and he promises to talk to her in person the following day. During the call, Sonja had entered Roland's apartment. Alone in her apartment Jeanne takes an overdose of sleeping pills, with only her cat to witness her death. Sonja and Roland on the other hand, make love after the phone call. Lying on the couch, the two new lovers light up cigarettes and fall asleep. Their burning cigarettes cause a fire in which both are killed.

Heraclitean transitions

Both love stories end in a conflagration, but Cortázar has also indicated the importance of fire in the transitions between the ancient and the modern story. Fire functions as the mediator between the two eras. 'Todos los fuegos' has an experimental narrative structure in which the transitions between Antiquity and Modernity become ever more frequent and unexpected, resulting in two timelines evolving into a state of flux. Cortázar thus combined the two Heraclitean themes of fire and flux in his narrative experiment. Playful references to different types of *logos* will be the third element. At first, the two stories are juxtaposed in clear consecutive chapters, but even here fire is the transitional element.

¹⁸ The modern characters have French names, but the city remains nameless. In a later interview (Picon Garfield 1981: 82) Cortázar identified the town as Paris.

The first chapter introduces the ancient characters in the arena. The modern story starts in the second chapter with Roland picking up the phone: ““Hola”, dice Roland Renoir, eligiendo un cigarrillo [...] y buscando los fósforos en el bolsillo de la bata.’ (OC I: 623)¹⁹ Cortázar continues with a ludic reference to eternal recurrence and to the *logos*. Roland repeats his opening and Jeanne also has to repeat twice what she says because their phone conversation is continuously interrupted by a third voice of an unknown man who is reading an endless series of numbers. In the following sentence, in a cluster of metaphors, Cortázar stresses darkness as yet another allusion to the Obscure One: ‘[...] de golpe un silencio todavía más oscuro en esa oscuridad que el teléfono vuelca en el ojo del oído.’ (OC I: 623)²⁰ The story then continues for four chapters with clear alterations between the ancient and the modern stories, but from the fifth chapter onwards Cortázar starts to shift between epochs within chapters: changing from one story to another in consecutive sentences. As has been indicated by María Elvira Luna Escudero-Alie (2002: 2),²¹ this fifth chapter again starts with a reference to fire: ““Ah,” dice Roland, frotando un fósforo.’ (OC I: 626)²² We would like to add to this analysis that Cortázar again combines the two Heraclitean themes of fire and flux, because the unannounced switch to the gladiator story, two sentences later, has a reference to the famous river-fragments: ‘Un río de escamas brillantes parece saltar de las manos del gigante negro y Marco tiene el tiempo preciso para hurtar el cuerpo a la red.’ (OC I: 626)²³ In fact, the metaphor allows Cortázar to combine an allusion to the river-fragments with a reference to fire. So the first sentence of the chapter is set in modern times and has a reference to fire: the match. The second sentence jumps back to Antiquity and has

¹⁹ All quotations come from the edition in the first volume of the *Obras completas* (2003), hereafter abbreviated as OC I. We also include a note with the English translation by Suzanne Jill Levine (Cortázar 2005: 115): ““Hello,” says Roland Renoir, choosing a cigarette [...] and looking for his matches in the pocket of his bathrobe.’

²⁰ ‘[...] suddenly a silence still darker than that darkness this telephone pours into the eye of his ear.’ (Cortázar 2005: 115)

²¹ See also Lagmanovich (1972) for a general analysis of the sequences.

²² ““Oh,” Roland says, striking a match.’ (Cortázar 2005: 118)

²³ ‘A river of shining scales seems to jump out of the black giant’s hand, and Marcus is just in time to dodge the net.’ (Cortázar 2005: 118)

a reference to a river: a river of shining metal scales. Their brilliance brings us back to the fire of the first sentence. We will discuss the importance of these metaphors and the transition, through language, from one element to another (water, fire, earth) in the next section, when we will also discuss the other transitions with references to rivers, water and fire. The sixth chapter is again fully set in modern times. It opens with a sentence from the phone conversation between Roland and Jeanne, continuously interrupted by the third voice of the unknown man (referred to as ‘the ant’) endlessly reading numbers.

The story of the gladiators continues in the seventh chapter with a reference to repetition, to the net (so implicitly to the river-metaphor) and to humidity: ‘Por segunda vez alcanza a zafarse de la red, pero ha medido mal el salto hacia atrás y resbala en una mancha húmeda de la arena.’ (OC I: 627)²⁴ In this seventh chapter we have the second unannounced shift between time periods: the story shifts back from Antiquity to modern times with yet another variation of intertwining Heraclitean elements. “‘El veneno”, se dice Irene, “alguna vez encontraré el veneno pero ahora acéptale la copa de vino, sé la más fuerte, espera tu hora”.’ (OC I: 628)²⁵ The next sentence jumps to modernity with new references to the mysterious voice and to repetition, after which Jeanne philosophizes about the nature of words:

‘La pausa parece prolongarse como se prolonga la insidiosa galería negra donde vuelve intermitente la voz lejana que repite cifras. Jeanne a creído siempre que los mensajes que verdaderamente cuentan están en algún momento más acá de toda palabra; quizá esas cifras digan más, sean más que cualquier discurso para el que las

²⁴ ‘For the second time, he manages to get clear of the net, but he has miscalculated the jump and slips on a damp spot in the sand.’ (Cortázar 2005: 120)

²⁵ “‘Poison,” Irene thinks, “someday I will find the poison, but now accept the wine from him, be the stronger one, wait your time.”’ (Cortázar 2005: 121)

está escuchando atentamente, como para ella el perfume de Sonia, [...].’ (OC I: 628)²⁶

The Spanish *cifra*, as the French *chiffre* can signify both numbers and code-language; the English ‘cyphre’ has retained only the latter meaning (Menczel 2002: 44-5). Language is always a code, a mysterious signal only understandable to the few. Towards the end of the telephone conversation words and numbers intermingle:

‘Desde muy lejos la hormiga dicta: ochocientos ochenta y ocho. “No vengas”, dice Jeanne, y es divertido oír las palabras mezclándose con las cifras, no ochocientos vengas ochenta y ocho. “No vengas nunca más, Roland”.’ (OC I: 630)²⁷

Cortázar might also have chosen numbers as a meta-reference to the work of Heraclitus whose fragments, as he knew from his many editions and as we have been indicating in this article, are referred to as numbers in many different listings.²⁸ Words, gestures, the entire universe speak in a *logos* only some of us are able to decode. We have already quoted the line of DK 1 we know to have been the opening of Heraclitus’s book: ‘Although this Logos is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it [...].’ (W 1) And we have referred to the secret meaning of words like *bios*. We should add DK 93: ‘The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives signs.’ (W 18) To Heraclitus this is true of

²⁶ ‘The pause seems to extend as the insidious black gallery, where the faraway voice which repeats figures and returns intermittently, extends. Jeanne has always believed that the messages which really count are at some point beyond all words; perhaps those figures say more, are more than any speech for the one who’s attentively listening to them, as Sonia’s perfume was for her; [...].’ (Cortázar 2005: 121)

²⁷ ‘Very far away the ant dictates: eight hundred and eighty-eight. “Don’t come,” Jeanne says, and it’s fun hearing the words mixing with the numbers. Don’t eight hundred come and eighty-eight, “don’t come anymore, Roland.”’ (Cortázar 2005: 123)

²⁸ The most straightforward explanation for the numbers is suggested by Cortázar by mentioning the numbers Jeanne had dialled and the numbers she can hear on the background in the same sentence (118; OC I: 623-4): numbers allow us to communicate through telephone, but the conversation between Jeanne and Roland is an example of non-communication, as are the absurd numbers read out ‘to someone who doesn’t speak’ (118). Other scholars have tried to explain the numbers: Curutchet (1975: 96) links 888 to infinity in cabbala; Escudero-Alie (2002: 3) claims it is a symbol for Christ; see now Monballieu, Praet & Janse (2011: 328-331).

speech in general, and of the *logos* of the universe. Philosophy becomes an initiation process into the true mysteries: the mysteries of the *Logos*.

In the opening sentence of the eighth chapter – ‘Roland bebe un trago de coñac / Roland takes a sip of cognac’ – Cortázar turns water into fire-wine. Brandy, the generic term for cognac in Spanish as in English, comes from ‘brandy wine’: compare the Dutch *brandewijn*, literally ‘fire-wine’ or the German *Weinbrand*. This can hardly be proven of course, but Cortázar knew enough German to have made the link between *Brand* and ‘fire’, and the María Moliner has a standard reference to the German-Dutch etymology.²⁹ In this chapter another switch occurs between the Roman and the Parisian story. This time repetition and variations in time are linked to the sequence of attacks by the Nubian as anticipated by his opponent and witnessed by members of the audience in previous fights. From then on the scenes shift ever more frequently. In the final chapter the final transition between the stories brings the themes of fire and water together again. ‘El pañuelo de gasa arde sin llama al borde del cenicero, chamuscándose lentamente, cae sobre la alfombra junto al montón de ropas y una copa de coñac.’ (OC I: 633).³⁰ The next sentence describes the crowd in the Roman arena trying to escape from the fire already spreading. The proconsul and his wife realize they will not be able to escape. The last switch has Sonja and Roland waking up, burning and screaming. The final sentence describes how the fire brigade arrives and starts fighting the fire.

Metaphorical transformations of the elements

‘Un río de escamas brillantes parece saltar de las manos del gigante negro y Marco tiene el tiempo preciso para hurtar el cuerpo a la red.’ (OC I: 626) We have quoted this sentence as

²⁹ See Moliner (1998), s.v. *brandy*: ‘ingl., del neerl. *brandewijn*, vino quemado.’

³⁰ ‘The gauze kerchief burns without flame on the edge of the ashtray; scorching slowly, it falls on the rug next to the pile of clothes and a glass of cognac.’ (Cortázar 2005: 126)

the first passage in which the two stories become intermingled. Heraclitus is present on a number of levels. The most obvious reference is to his well-known river fragments. But Cortázar is playing on different levels here. Before, he had introduced the Nubian giant as a *retiarius*: a gladiator armed with a trident and a net, but whose net is not made out of rope, as would have been usual, but out of metal scales. This choice allows Cortázar to make the scales reflect the light of the burning sun. He had already mentioned that the helmet of Marcus is also reflecting towards the *velarium* that will later catch fire, killing all the spectators.³¹ In the realm of the literary *logos* where Cortázar is lord of the oracle, the flowing movement of the shining metal net can be described as a river. *Logos* can combine the three elements explicitly mentioned in Heraclitus. The author can turn one element into another. The metal scales are solid: they represent 'earth'. They reflect the sunlight: they are shining (*brillantes*) and thus represent fire. Through the metaphor of the river, this combination of earth and fire is also a flux: water. The opposites have become one. In a subsequent fighting scene we find a variation on the shining river metaphor with reference to the Heraclitean thunderbolt: 'Marco se tira hacia delante y sólo entonces alza el escudo para protegerse del río brillante que escapa como un rayo de la mano del nubio.' (OC I: 629)³² A comparable metaphor – 'una lluvia de chispas' (127) – is used on the final page to describe the fire of the *velarium*: 'Licas, el primero en comprender, le muestra el lienzo más distante del viejo velario que empieza a desgarrarse mientras una lluvia de chispas cae sobre el público que busca confusamente la salida.' (OC I: 633)³³ In the final description of the fire in the arena Cortázar included yet another combination of water and fire: '[...] un jirón

³¹ 'El calor es insoportable, le pesa el yelmo que devuelve los rayos del sol contra el velario y las gradas.' (OC I: 624) / 'The heat is unbearable, his helmet, returning the sun's rays to the velarium and the stands, feels heavy.' (Cortázar 2005: 116)

³² 'Marcus lunges forward and only then raises the shield to protect himself from the shining river that escapes the Nubian's hand like lightning.' (Cortázar 2005: 122)

³³ 'Licas, the first to understand, points to the furthest canvas of the old *velarium*, which is beginning to tear while a rain of sparks falls over the people seeking exits in confusion.' (Cortázar 2005: 127)

de tela flota en el extremo de las llamas, [...]’ (OC I: 633)³⁴ Cortázar was quite fond of puns. When Irene and the others are trying to leave the imperial box and the people in the arena are trying to escape from the burning *velario*, he mentions for the first time that she is wearing a ‘purple veil’ (125) / un ‘velo morado’ (OC I: 632). Perhaps, but this is purely speculative, the choice for a burning *velario* in this story is another combination of water and fire, since the Spanish retains the veiled echo of a river: *vela-río*. Mentioning a ‘purple veil’ / ‘velo morado’ might inspire the reader to think of the same pun.

Fire and the *logos* are combined in the phone conversation between Jeanne and Roland, or rather with regard to the silence of Roland and the absurd series of numbers read on the background. “‘Soy yo”, dice Jeanne, pero se lo ha dicho más a ella misma que a ese silencio opuesto en el que bailan, como en un telón de fondo, algunas chispas de sonido.’ (OC I: 625)³⁵ The synaesthesia of the visual (sparks dancing) and the auditory (sparks of sound) is a variation of the triple metaphor Cortázar used in the beginning of the phone conversation where he combined eyes with ears, darkness with silence, and silence again with the flow: ‘[...] esa oscuridad que el teléfono vuelca en el ojo del oído.’ (OC I: 623)³⁶ We should also mention the Heraclitean image of the bow used to describe the fight over the telephone and its paradoxical unity between silence and speech, between communication and non-communication and, as we have seen in fragment DK 48, between life and death:

‘El silencio en la línea parece tenderse como un arco, hasta que lo corta secamente una cifra distante, novecientos cuatro. “¡Basta de dictar esos números idiotas!”, grita

³⁴ ‘[...] a shred of material floats on the tip of the flames and falls on the proconsul [...]’ (Cortázar 2005: 127)

³⁵ “‘It’s me,” Jeanne says, but more for herself than to that silence on the other side in which, like background, some sparks of sound dance.’ (Cortázar 2005: 118)

³⁶ ‘[...] a silence still darker than that darkness the telephone pours into the eye of his ear.’ (Cortázar 2005: 115)

Roland con todas sus fuerzas, y antes de alejar el receptor del oído alcanza a escuchar el click en el otro extremo, el arco que suelta su flecha inofensiva.’ (OC I: 630)³⁷

In fact, the opening sentence of the short story already offers an impressive combination of Heraclitean elements. ‘Así será algún día su estatua, piensa irónicamente el procónsul mientras alza el brazo, lo fija en el gesto del saludo, se deja petrificar por la ovación de un público que dos horas de circo y de calor no han fatigado.’ (OC I: 622)³⁸ The circus is a symbol of the eternal recurrence.³⁹ The heat is a first reference to fire. Communication – verbal and non-verbal: the cheers and the arm raised in a formal salute – is combined with the element of time. The proconsul plans for the future, but the future has other plans. There is already a certain repetition and that which is repeated refers to a transformation of one element into another, and this transformation is linked to language. The proconsul thinks about how he, so to speak, will be turned into stone: he takes on a pose he hopes to be taking on again when he will be posing for his statue. As he is taking on this pose, he has to stay that way because of the cheers of the crowd: they, so to speak, petrify (*petrificar*) him for some moments. *Logos*, metaphors, communication, time, circular time, the changing of elements, fire and even desire are all present in the very first sentence of the story.

Parallels and Inversions

³⁷ ‘The silence on the line seems to stretch like a bow, until a distant number, nine hundred and four, cuts into it. “Stop dictating those stupid numbers!” Roland shouts at the top of his voice, and before putting the receiver down he manages to hear the click on the other end, the bow that lets go of its harmless arrow.’ (Cortázar 2005: 123-4) There are only these two references to a bow (*arco*), but a very important image referring to the unity of opposites is the archway or gallery: *galería* is used ten times.

³⁸ ‘That’s what his statue will look like someday, the proconsul ironically thinks as he raises his arm, holds it in a formal salute, lets himself be petrified by a cheering crowd that two hours of circus and heat have not fatigued.’ (Cortázar 2005: 114)

³⁹ The circularity of the circus is also stressed through the metaphor of the eye, combined with references to curved paths and preceding fights: ‘[...] el enorme ojo de bronce donde los rastrillos y las hojas de palma han dibujado los curvos senderos ensombrecidos por algún rastro de las luchas precedentes.’ (OC I: 624) / ‘[...] the enormous bronze eye where hoes and palm leaves have sketched their curved paths darkened by traces of preceding fights.’ (Cortázar 2005: 116)

Cortazar's narrative technique would seem to suggest that time, far from being linear, is circular and that the ancient and the modern stories are examples of the eternal recurrence. But in fact, the two stories are not identical; they are rather variations of a common pattern. We have already indicated that both stories talk of a love triangle, but in Antiquity the triangle is formed by one woman and two men; in the modern story we have one man and two women. The gladiator is killed by the black *retiarius*, and the estranged proconsul and his wife die in a fire they did not start. Although they were thinking of killing one another with poison, her last gesture is removing a piece of burning cloth from her husband's back. Jeanne commits suicide by taking pills, with only her cat⁴⁰ as a witness; the new lovers die in a fire caused by their own burning cigarettes. Sonja's last gesture is '[...] queriendo desatarse del brazo ardiente que la envuelve.' (OC I: 634)⁴¹ The ancient story is set in open air, in the circus. Communication between the gladiator in the arena and the proconsul's wife in the imperial gallery is non verbal. The words and gestures exchanged between the proconsul and his wife actually hide their true feelings and intentions towards each other. The communication between the main characters is constantly disturbed by the shouts of the crowd and by the small-talk of some friends of the proconsul also present in the imperial box. The modern story is set inside two apartments. Sonja visits Jeanne, tells her what Roland should have told, and sets the stage for Jeanne's suicide. Further communication between the apartments is through the telephone.⁴² In the conversation the real subject is only implied, and neither Jeanne nor Roland express their inner thoughts. The conversation is constantly interrupted by the voice (of 'the ant') dictating numbers. Several metaphors used during the phone call refer to fights and to an

⁴⁰ Luchting (1972: 358) writes that the cat is black, as a parallel with the Nubian, but the colour of the cat is nowhere mentioned.

⁴¹ '[...] trying to break loose from the burning arm that surrounds her.' (Cortázar 2005: 127)

⁴² Luchting has a parallel between the net (*la red*) of the *retiarius* and the telephone network: 'la red telefónica' (1972: 358).

avalanche.⁴³ As already said, the proconsul's wife fears she will be poisoned and plans to poison her husband. Jeanne poisons herself. The gladiator and the *retiarius* kill each other. One falls on top of the other and in the end 'Marco mueve lentamente un brazo, clavado en la arena como un enorme insecto brillante.' (OC I: 631)⁴⁴ Jeanne dies caressing her cat, her fingers contracting. The cat rolls over on her back waiting in vain for further caresses.

In his copy of Battistini, Cortázar heavily underlined the following sentence where Battistini compares the presentation of the fragments of Heraclitus by Diels-Kranz (based upon the alphabetical order of the authors quoting Heraclitus, and not on any interpretation or reconstruction of his work) with constellations:

Cette présentation a le mérite de présenter le texte d'Héraclite comme une trame mystérieuse où les mots se font echo à distance, en écheveaux mêlés, en réponses et questions qui, d'énigme à énigme, finissent par s'accorder et s'éclairer: ainsi dans le ciel, les étoiles à la fois confondues et distinctes, composant, au hasard désordonné de leur place, une harmonie fixe. (1959: 16)

These ideas seem to have inspired Cortázar: if stars unknowingly form a pattern, if there is harmony in apparent chaos, and if random words or fragments can form a constellation, then the parallels Heraclitus recognized between the *Logos* regulating the Universe and *logos* as human discourse allow the creation of a literary universe corresponding to these same rules.

Cortázar expressed the idea of the *figura* in an interview with Luis Harss:

⁴³ See the following examples: "[...] yo quería evitarte ese golpe." [...] Roland, que ha preparado sus frases previendo una avalancha de reproches. "¿Evitarme el golpe?", dice Jeanne.' (OC I: 630) / "[...] I wanted you to spare that blow." [...] Roland, who has prepared his words with an avalanche of accusations in mind. [...]. "Spare me that blow?" Jeanne says.' (Cortázar 2005: 123); 'El silencio en la línea parece tenderse como un arco [...]. [...] el arco que suelta su flecha inofensiva.' (OC I: 630) / 'The silence on the line seems to stretch like a bow [...]. [...] the bow that lets go off its harmless arrow.' (Cortázar 2005: 123-4) Referring to the person dictating the numbers as an ant, might be another parallel with the crowd.

⁴⁴ "[...] Marcus slowly moves his arm, pinned to the arena like an enormous shining insect.' (Cortázar 2005: 124)

Cortázar: Es la noción de lo que yo llamo las figuras. Es como el sentimiento – que muchos tenemos, sin duda, pero que yo sufro de una manera muy intensa – de que aparte de nuestros destinos individuales somos parte de figuras que desconocemos. Pienso que todos nosotros componemos figuras. [...] Siento continuamente la posibilidad de ligazones, de circuitos que se cierran y que nos interrelacionan al margen de toda explicación racional y de toda relación humana.

Harss: Recuerda una frase de Cocteau, según la cual las estrellas individuales que forman una constelación no tienen idea de que forman una constelación.

Cortázar: Nosotros vemos la Osa Mayor, pero las estrellas que la forman no saben que son la Osa Mayor. Quizá nosotros somos también Osas Mayores y Menores y no lo sabemos porque estamos refugiados en nuestras individualidades. (1975: 278)

According to Heraclitus, most people do not understand the *Logos*: they do not realize that time is cyclical and that their lives are, at best, variations of lives past. To each individual the world seems new and events seem unique, but there is a ‘hidden harmony’ (DK 54 / W 116) that connects them all. Although the world, history and time seem chaotic, the *Logos*-Fire regulates everything. Heraclitus also expressed the same idea from the opposite perspective in DK 124: ‘The fairest universe is but a heap of rubbish piled up at random.’ (W 40) Cortázar created a harmony between a story set in Antiquity and one set in modern times. His literary work imitates the universal *Logos* and, as events over time form patterns, so do these two stories. The parallels and inversions, repetitions and transmutations between the two stories can be seen as the *figurae verborum* of events in his literary universe. The characters and events in the two stories relate to one another in parallelism and chiasm. The events described are variations on a common theme and can thus be compared to the *polyptoton*. Combine this

with the wide use of Heraclitean metaphors and other tropes already discussed, and we will start to understand to what extent the poetical worldview of Heraclitus influenced the writing of ‘Todos los fuegos’.

Predictions and misunderstandings

None of the characters in ‘Todos los fuegos el fuego’ seem to understand what the *Logos* has in store for them. They all have dreams, they all have hopes and they all make plans, but none of these turn out as expected. No one understands the *Logos*. The proconsul will never be petrified, Irene will never poison her husband. Predictions, ‘signs’, are misunderstood. Marcus the gladiator had a dream in which he saw a fish and broken columns. Just before the fight, someone tells him the proconsul is not going to pay him in gold coins today. But he fails to understand what these signs mean until it is too late. Cortázar has included a level of meaning his readers will only be able to decode if they have some knowledge of ancient gladiators. Marcus is the fish in more than one sense of the word. He will be fighting a *retiarius* armed with the trident of Poseidon and a net. That connection is quite obvious. But Cortázar also mentions that Marcus had killed a Thracian in a previous fight.⁴⁵ Now, the Thracian or Thraex was a type of gladiator: the usual opponent of the Murmillo or Myrmillo-Mirmillo, who were, on occasions, also paired against *retiarii*. The description of Marcus’s armament confirms this: a helmet, greaves, a shield, and a sword. All these elements allow us to identify Marcus as a Murmillo or Myrmillo. These gladiators wore helmets with a broad brim and a high crest shaped like a fish.⁴⁶ So Marcus dreamt of himself as the fish caught in the net of the *retiarius*. The broken

⁴⁵ See: ‘[...] una doble mirada inútil sobre el cadáver, de un tracio diestramente muerto de un tajo en la garganta.’ (OC I: 625) / ‘[...] a double futile look upon the corpse of a Thracian skilfully killed by a gash in the throat.’ (Cortázar 2005: 117)

⁴⁶ Originally a sea-fish: the *Pagellus mormyrus*. See Lewis and Short (1955), s.v. *mirmillo* and Liddell, Scott and Jones (1953), s.v. *mormyros*.

columns in his dream predict the ruin of the entire arena and thus the fire. Together the two dream-images combine, once again, water and fire.

Repetitions, fate and the unexpected

And yet people also know what is going to happen. Jeanne can predict how the conversation over the telephone will develop. She can predict it because she can see herself and what she is going to say will be the repetition of what countless other betrayed lovers have said: '[...] va a decirle a Roland eso que exactamente la incorporará a la galería de las plañideras telefónicas...' (OC I: 625)⁴⁷ Once the first word is said, the sequence of events leading up to the death of all involved is set in motion. Both Roland and Jeanne have to repeat several times what they are saying. Irene also can predict what is going to happen:

'[...] antes de oír las palabras que seguirán, Irene sabe que el procónsul doblará la apuesta a favor del nubio, y que después la mirará amablemente y ordenará que le sirvan vino helado. Y ella beberá el vino y comentará con Urania la estatura y la ferocidad del reciario nubio; cada movimiento está previsto aunque se lo ignore en sí mismo, [...].' (OC I: 625)⁴⁸

In the fight in the arena, the gladiator and the spectators think they know what is going to happen. Here too, Cortázar has introduced numerous references to repetition and to circles. Licas knows what moves and tricks the gladiators are going to use because he is an 'experto en incontables fastos de circo' (OC I: 625) / 'expert in countless circus events' (Cortázar 2005: 117). The Nubian will use the same tricks as in previous fights, but several

⁴⁷ 'She's going to say to Roland what precisely is going to put her into the gallery of telephonic weepers.' (Cortázar 2005: 118)

⁴⁸ 'Before hearing the words that will follow, Irene knows that the proconsul will double his bet on the Nubian, and that after, he will look at her amiably and order chilled wine, and she will drink the wine and comment to Urania on the Nubian's height and ferocity. Each motion is predicted, although one doesn't notice it.' (Cortázar 2005: 117)

characters observe – repeatedly! – that Marcus is not the same as he used to be: “‘No es el que era’”, piensa Licas lamentando su apuesta. Marco se ha encorvado un poco, siguiendo el movimiento giratorio del nubio. [...] “No es el que era”, repite Licas.’ (OC I: 627-8) ⁴⁹

Final scenes

In the penultimate scenes, just before the fire destroys all, we have a reference to all four elements, neatly distributed over the ancient and the modern stories. As she starts walking out of the imperial box, Irene is thinking about a ‘[...] villa a orillas del lago, donde el aire de la noche la ayudará a olvidar el olor a la plebe, los últimos gritos, un brazo moviéndose lentamente como si acariciara la tierra.’ (OC I: 632)⁵⁰ In the apartment Sonja and Roland have made love and are having cigarettes: ‘Fumemos’ (OC I: 633) / ‘Let’s just smoke’ (Cortázar 2005: 126). They put the matches and the cigarettes away without looking while they are falling asleep: ‘El pañuelo de gasa arde sin llama al borde del cenicero, chamuscándose lentamente, cae sobre la alfombra junto al montón de ropas y una copa de coñac.’ (OC I: 633)⁵¹

The story ends with an intervention by the fire squad. This ending interacts with Heraclitus on a number of levels. First of all, it is an obvious reference to the philosophy of the flux. But also refers to the *ekpyrosis* and the idea that the cosmic dominance of fire will be balanced by a deluge, by water. But it can even be read as the narrative implementation of fragment DK 103: ‘In the circle the beginning and the end are common.’ (W 109) The very last word of the story is spoken by the chief of the fire-brigade and it is the perfect statement of the

⁴⁹ “‘He’s not the same”, Licas thinks, regretting his bet. Marcus has bent over a little, following the Nubian’s circling motion. [...] “He’s not the same,” Licas repeats.’ (Cortázar 2005: 119-20)

⁵⁰ ‘[...] villa on the shores of the lake, where the night air will help her forget the smell of the mob, the last shouts, an arm moving slowly as if it caressed the earth.’ (Cortázar 2005: 126)

⁵¹ ‘The gauze kerchief burns without flame on the edge of the ashtray; scorching slowly, it falls on the rug next to the pile of clothes and a glass of cognac.’ (Cortázar 2005: 126)

Heraclitean ode on war, on vitality through destruction so admired by Nietzsche. The final word is a new beginning. It reads: ‘Vamos.’ (OC I: 634)

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